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Secretaries Clinton, Gates to Hold Talks with South Korean Officials

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates will hold a full range of security and alliance talks with South Korean officials July 21 in Seoul.

Clinton will also attend the post-ministerial meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Hanoi, Vietnam, as well as bilateral talks with Vietnamese officials during a portion of the trip, says Kurt Campbell, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs. And in Hanoi, Clinton will join with Vietnamese officials in commemorating the 15th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam.

“There will be several events to underscore the importance of how far the United States and Vietnam have come in terms of our bilateral relationship and the prospects for closer coordination and cooperation in the future,” Campbell added.

After the ASEAN meeting, Clinton will join the foreign ministers of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam for their second meeting to discuss the Lower Mekong Initiative, which is a program that bridges lessons learned from the Mississippi River in the United States and the Mekong River in Southeast Asia, Campbell said.

“We have some specific programs that we will announce that deal with issues associated with agriculture, climate change and sustainability on the Mekong,” Campbell said.

And Clinton is leading the U.S. delegation to the International Conference on Afghanistan in Kabul on July 20. Other stops may be included on the trip, but plans have not been completed.

The meetings with South Korean Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan and National Defense Minister Kim Tae-young are the first “2-plus-2” talks held between U.S. and South Korean ministers. “It is meant to signal the very real and long-standing strength of our alliance and to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War,” Campbell told reporters during a July 15 State Department press briefing. The range of the talks with Korean officials will include security issues in Northeast Asia, the U.S.-South Korean alliance and economic relations.

The sinking of the South Korean naval ship Cheonan in

March by a North Korean submarine will also be discussed, Campbell said, and it will be discussed at the ASEAN meeting in Hanoi as well.

“We will be in deep consultations, not only Secretary Gates but Secretary Clinton, with our counterparts in terms of making sure that we’re very closely aligned in our strategy moving forward,” Campbell said. “The United States is considering a variety of options associated with North Korea.”

At a Pentagon briefing July 14, press secretary Geoff Morrell said that since the sinking of the Cheonan, the United States and South Korea have been engaged in high-level close consultations to devise additional ways to bolster alliance capabilities and improve regional stability. Combined military exercises will be discussed during the 2-plus-2 talks, “including new naval and air exercises in both the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea,” he added.

These exercises will augment already planned exercises with elements of the U.S. and South Korean armed forces, Morrell said. “All of these exercises are defensive in nature, but will send a clear message of deterrence to North Korea and demonstrate our steadfast commitment to the defense of South Korea,” he added.

U.S. and South Korean officials will also discuss a plan agreed to by President Obama and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak during the Group of 20 meeting in Toronto in June that will transfer wartime operational control of forces on the Korean Peninsula to South Korea by December 2015. The transfer had been scheduled for April 2012.

U.S. Says Attacks in Uganda Are “Real Concern”

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. and Jane Morse
Staff Writers

Washington — When the Somalia-based al-Shabaab terrorist group claimed that it had carried out the July 11 attacks in Uganda, it created a “real concern for us and for Africans,” says the State Department’s counterterrorism coordinator, Daniel Benjamin.

The attacks came “at a particularly inopportune time ... a moment when Africa was really celebrating a global triumph in terms of how it carried off the World Cup,” Benjamin said in a July 13 interview with MSNBC News.

“But it’s something that we’re going to have to consider, whether this group has reached a new level of capability,” Ambassador Benjamin added. The terrorist group has some indirect links to the transnational terrorist group al-Qaida, and this attack was carried out well outside of Somalia, Benjamin said.

Al-Shabaab operatives detonated two bombs in less than an hour at two locations in Uganda's capital city of Kampala on July 11, killing at least 76 people and injuring approximately 85 others as celebrations were held after the World Cup championship match, according to Kampala police officials in news reports. On July 12 al-Shabaab's press office issued a statement to the news media claiming responsibility for the coordinated attacks, according to published news accounts.

Benjamin said al-Shabaab's relationship to al-Qaida has to be examined with great care. "Some of the leadership of al-Shabaab has pledged its support to al-Qaida; al-Qaida has been in touch with al-Shabaab from time to time," he said. One common characteristic of al-Qaida is its willingness to make links and affiliations with other known terrorist organizations across the globe, though not all of them can be considered direct links, terrorism experts say.

"Most of the rank and file, however, we assess is actually not interested in carrying on al-Qaida's global war, very concerned only about issues within Somalia," Benjamin said. "So I think we need to be very careful about how we link the two together."

"It's worth noting that some very high-level al-Qaida East Africa operatives have been involved in training some al-Shabaab individuals, but we certainly do not see these groups as having merged or being unitary in any way," he added.

Benjamin said terrorism analysts don't see al-Shabaab as being linked directly to al-Qaida "just yet, and we hope that it won't move any further towards the extreme."

During a White House background briefing July 13, senior Obama administration officials said that U.S. intelligence experts believe al-Shabaab's claim of responsibility for the bombings. The United States has been threatened by this group ever since it was formed in Somalia in 2006, the briefers said. While it has conducted numerous violent acts inside Somalia, the attacks in Uganda would be the first to be successful outside of Somalia's borders.

Al-Shabaab, the senior administration officials said, has dedicated itself to the overthrow of the current Somali government. African people find al-Shabaab "reprehensible," the U.S. officials said, but weak Somali government structures have allowed them to operate unabated. There is a need, the briefers said, to build up the peacekeeping capabilities of the African Union Military Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somalia's Transitional Federal Government.

The United States is working closely with its partners in

the region to block al-Shabaab's efforts to expand its reach, and has identified and frozen the assets of an al-Shabaab financier, the U.S. officials said. An expanded team of terrorism experts and agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service have been sent to Uganda to help that government investigate this new incursion of cross-border terrorism.

The senior administration officials acknowledged that there is a need for additional information in order to combat al-Shabaab, which is suspected of having ties to both the East African and Arabian Peninsula branches of al-Qaida, but they also expressed some confidence in dealing with the threat.

"It's not as if al-Shabaab is some kind of well-loved force in Somalia," the U.S. official said, noting that the group is responsible for the assassination of a number of Somali peace activists, international aid workers, numerous civil society figures and journalists, as well as African Union peacekeeping troops in Mogadishu.

Al-Shabaab, the briefer said, is "an organization notorious for its treatment of civilians and of the Somalia people. So I just want to make sure one doesn't inadvertently paint a picture of ... this incredibly strong organization that's got control and popular support."

AL-SHABAAB BACKGROUND

Al-Shabaab is the militant wing of the former Somali Islamic Courts Council that took over most of southern Somalia in the second half of 2006, according to the State Department's most recent annual Country Reports on Terrorism. In December 2006 and January 2007, Somali government and Ethiopian forces routed the Islamic Courts militias in a two-week war. Since the end of 2006, al-Shabaab and disparate clan militias have led a violent insurgency, using guerrilla warfare and terrorist tactics against the Ethiopian presence in Somalia, the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, and the African Union Mission in Somalia peacekeepers, the report said.

According to a U.S. Congressional Research Service report, the Somalia-based Al-Shabaab terrorist group, which was designated by the U.S. government as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on February 29, 2008, "is an example of a group whose involvement with criminal groups and activity is open for debate. Al-Shabaab spearheads a violent insurgency, along with several affiliated organizations, against the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, and controls large swaths of the southern portion of the country."

Historic Finance Reform Bill Moves to Become Law

Washington — The U.S. Senate passed a bill that will radically reshape the financial system for the first time since the aftermath of the Great Depression.

The chamber passed the final bill July 15 mostly on Democratic votes, with three Republican senators breaking ranks with their colleagues to support the measure. Because the House of Representatives approved the bill in June, it goes directly to the president's desk. President Obama will likely sign the bill into law next week, according to the White House.

The explicit objective of the measure is to reduce the risk of a major financial crisis in the future.

Christopher Dodd, Democratic chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, who has shepherded the bill, said he hopes it "will set our country on a course of financial stability and success in the years to come."

The measure tries to address what its writers perceive as the root causes of the recent financial problems. It bars banks from trading taxpayer-supported money for their own profit, makes trading of financial instruments known as derivatives more transparent and their traders more accountable, gives regulators new powers to set stricter standards on the largest and most interconnected banks as well as to break up or liquidate those non-bank financial institutions whose failure is deemed a threat to the entire financial system.

"As a result, no firm will be insulated from the consequences of its action. ... The bill makes absolutely clear that taxpayers will never be asked to bear the costs of a financial firm's failure," Treasury Deputy Secretary Neal Wolin said July 15.

In 2008 and 2009, the Treasury Department, central bankers and financial regulators struggled to come up with ad hoc solutions to prevent the bankruptcies of Bear Sterns, an investment bank, and AIG, the insurance giant, that regulators feared could have created havoc in the economy. The government ended up pumping public funds into AIG and some commercial banks to save them from failure.

The bill creates two new regulatory bodies: a council of regulators and the Consumer Financial Protection Agency. The council is designed to identify risks to the entire financial system and recommend steps to reduce those risks, such as heightened supervision and stricter capital reserve standards for certain financial institutions. The consumer agency, set within the structure of the U.S. central bank, will be devoted to the protection of consumers who use financial products such as home

loans and credit cards. The creation of such an agency proved to be one of the most contentious issues during a yearlong debate about the reform.

Financial reforms were at the top of the agenda of the last three summits of the Group of 20 (G20), the world's leading economies. At the June meeting in Canada, the G20 committed to advancing financial reform aimed at strengthening regulation of the world's financial markets.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Although most lawmakers, experts and financial industry leaders agree that the bill will have a dramatic impact on the financial industry and the broader economy, they disagree on specific outcomes. Democrats and liberal-leaning experts hail the measure as an effective safeguard against a serious financial crisis similar to the one brought about by the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market in 2007. Republicans and conservative experts have lambasted the bill for what they see as a government overreach unlikely to prevent future financial crises. Instead, it "will deter lending and freeze up credit," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican.

Observers from the liberal New America Foundation believe that the full impact of the new law may not be clear for years. It leaves many specific details to the discretion of regulators, such as what makes an institution too big to fail or what standards are reasonable. Thus, "in many ways the passage of the new law is just the beginning of a long fight ahead" between industry lobbyists and consumer advocates, said Justin King in his blog on the group's Web site.

The measure doesn't address major problems in the housing market that triggered the crisis, something that Republicans see as a major weakness. Deputy Secretary Wolin said the Obama administration plans to tackle this problem in 2011 as "it is obvious that the housing finance system cannot continue to operate as it has in the past."

Referendum Is Key to Progress in Sudan, U.S. Special Envoy Says

General Gration notes Africa may have new nation in six months

By Jim Fisher-Thompson
Staff Writer

Washington — An upcoming referendum in southern Sudan to decide the region's political future must be "free, fair, credible and transparent" to ensure lasting peace and stability for the whole nation, and that is a goal the U.S. government is working hard to achieve, says U.S. Presidential Special Envoy to Sudan Scott Gration.

"We might have a new country" in six months, Gration

said. So there is an urgent need to prepare for a possible independent south if a majority of southerners vote that way next January. "We're not prejudging the referendum," he added, but must plan for such an outcome.

The retired U.S. Air Force major general gave a countdown to the referendum at a July 13 briefing sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Africa Program. Former U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia David Shinn and Sudanese Embassy Charge D'Affaires Dr. Akec K.A. Khoc attended the event moderated by CSIS Africa Program Director Jennifer Cooke.

In 2005, the United States, along with international and African partners, facilitated an agreement between the government of Sudan and the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) ending a decades-long north/south civil war that had killed or displaced millions. The resulting Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) provided for a referendum to be held in the south no later than January 2011 to decide whether the region would become an independent nation or remain a part of Sudan.

Gration said the U.S. government was working "on the ground" in the south with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community members helping to prepare for the vote, which includes organizing the "diaspora vote" of southerners living in eight foreign countries.

"While the time is short" before the critical ballot, Gration said he was optimistic about Sudan's future. Since being named special envoy in March 2009, he said, "we have accomplished a lot. And looking forward, we will make a difference" toward a lasting peace for the war-torn nation.

With the southern referendum looming, Gration said Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton "has taken a very positive role" in areas like overseeing a diplomatic expansion that tripled the State Department's presence in the south.

On the multilateral level, Gration said, "we are building a [diplomatic] team of countries like Norway and the United Kingdom" to help ensure provisions of the CPA are implemented. In addition, other countries and organizations including France, Russia, China, the African Union and United Nations "partnered with the United States to make a [positive] difference in Sudan."

One such group — "the Envoy Six" — planned to meet in the region July 17 to discuss the southern referendum, and Gration said he would attend. He said he would also meet with Sudanese government representatives in

Khartoum and rebels groups in Doha on his trip to the region beginning July 15.

On the economic front, Gration said, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is devoting personnel and millions of dollars to help forestall famine that threatens 4.3 million people in southern Sudan. The agency will host a regional conference in August with experts and implementers on the ground to discuss better ways of ensuring food security, including improving seed quality, fertilization and better planting techniques.

But "we can't just focus on the south," Gration told his CSIS audience. While the CPA cease-fire between north and south has held, fighting in the Darfur region continues.

Declaring "justice and accountability are critical ... [to] a lasting peace in Darfur," Gration said his office was working on a two-track approach to the problem involving peace talks with the Khartoum government and rebel groups in Doha and "working in Darfur itself" to protect its vulnerable residents.

The son of missionaries who worked in the Congo and Kenya, Gration said, "To me it's just really terrible" that more than 2 million people are living in crude huts in Darfur "where they are subjected to gender-based violence" and to other injustices and inhumanities.

Crime must stop and security must be restored in Darfur, Gration said. "We're working very hard with the government of Sudan, UNAMID [The African Union/U.N. hybrid operation in Darfur] and NGOs to come up with a plan for Darfur security and stabilization."

"I'm pleased to say we just got the basic outline of a plan from the government of Sudan and it is a very, very good plan," Gration added.

During his July visit to the region, Gration said, "I will work with these officials in Khartoum and Darfur, NGOs and members of the community to make sure we put into place a system of security and stabilization" that ends the violence and provides a framework for lasting peace.

Seeds of Peace Campers Asked to Spread Message of Tolerance

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — While governments can do important work to promote peace, tolerance and understanding can come only from people, and not government bureaucracies, Under Secretary of State for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy Judith McHale told South Asian

Seeds of Peace participants at the State Department.

Speaking July 14, McHale praised the teenagers from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan, who had just completed a three-week camp program in Maine designed to promote conflict resolution and mutual understanding. They were joined at the camp by Palestinian, Israeli, Egyptian and American teens.

"During your weeks at camp you established new friendships that cross borders and barriers. You also became part of a new, global family that includes thousands of Seeds of Peace leaders," McHale said.

But Seeds of Peace "is more than a summer program," she said. "It is dedicated to empowering young leaders from regions of conflict with the leadership skills required to advance reconciliation and coexistence."

Now, as alumni and Seeds of Peace ambassadors, the campers should use their experiences to promote "lasting relationships and continued public service," McHale said.

The South Asian participants were among 164 campers who arrived at the Otisfield, Maine, camp on June 23 for the program's 18th season. Beginning with 46 Israeli, Palestinian and Egyptian teenagers in 1993, the Seeds of Peace network now includes more than 4,000 young people, some of whom now serve as camp counselors or work elsewhere within the organization.

With support from the State Department, the program was expanded to include participants from South Asia, beginning in 2001.

It is a competitive program to get into, according to a June 24 news article in Maine's Sun Journal, with only 300 campers selected each year from among 8,000 applicants. The newspaper also said participation carries a \$6,000 price tag, including transportation, but that some campers are able to find sponsors. The organization also receives financial assistance from donors and benefactors, including the State Department and Kiss My Face natural personal care products.

As the new Seeds gathered for a flag-raising ceremony at the beginning of their camp experience, a second-year female participant from Egypt told the Sun Journal that participants who are idealistically expecting peace will be told that it is an elusive goal, but that the program nevertheless asks them to courageously pursue it.

"The only thing you can do is carry on," she said in the Sun Journal. "We live in a world of atrocities. The journey you are embarking on is not easy. But if you want to enjoy the honey, you must endure the sting of the bee."

"Be brave. You are blessed to be here. Bloodshed and hate and war are not inevitable. We are the Seeds of Peace," the Egyptian teen said.

According to a July 14 State Department media note, participants remain in touch with each other after their camp experience, both online and through digital videoconferences, as well as face to face through home stays and regional programs.

The visit to Washington at the conclusion of their camp experience allows them to share their experiences and gain exposure to U.S. policymakers. Along with the State Department, the Seeds also visit the White House and meet with members of the U.S. Congress.

"The Seeds participants will see how U.S. leaders are interested in their achievements and are counting on them to create a more just and secure future in their region and for all peoples and nations," the media note said.

Addressing the Seeds, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake said, "All of you are really going to be serving as important bridges between all of your three countries."

"We in the State Department are really so pleased to be able to support your efforts and so pleased to be able to help you establish what we hope will be lifelong friendships between all of you," Blake said, encouraging the Seeds to expand that circle of friendship to others in their countries.

U.S.-Indonesian Deep Ocean Explorers Begin Voyage of Discovery

Three-year partnership includes real-time sharing of data, seafloor images

By Cheryl L. Pellerin
Science Writer

Washington — Scientists from the United States and Indonesia have begun a journey of discovery in a region of the deep ocean near Indonesia where almost no one has gone before, sharing what they learn as it happens with scientists, students and citizens around the globe.

The Indonesia-USA Deep-Sea Exploration of the Sangihe Talaud region, called INDEX 2010, is a three-year partnership between the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Indonesian Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, and the Indonesian Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology to map the seafloor and study the rich marine biodiversity of an area of southeast Asia where the Indian and Pacific oceans meet.

The expedition advances the approach that President

Obama called for in his June 2009 commitment at Cairo University to renew U.S. engagement with Muslim-majority countries.

The expedition includes two specially equipped exploration and research ships and two state-of-the-art exploration command centers — one in Seattle and one in Jakarta — where U.S. and Indonesian scientists will work side by side during ship operations and open their discoveries to students and the public through a dedicated website.

Data and images from the seafloor are being sent from the ships and from the U.S. ship's remotely operated vehicle (ROV) in near real time via broadband satellite and high-speed Internet, allowing scientists and other participants ashore to engage in the expedition via telepresence, giving them an up-close view of the area being explored.

"We're very happy that the government of Indonesia has welcomed us in a partnership of science and technology development," Craig McLean, acting assistant administrator of NOAA's Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research, told America.gov, "to bring our relatively newfound exploration capabilities in the United States to share with our Indonesian colleagues at a scientific level and at a level of public interest and education."

"The area of the ocean that we're going to look at has been of interest to ocean explorers for some time," McLean said. "Biologically it's recognized as a particularly diverse, if not potentially the most diverse, area of ocean in the world."

"The tectonic phenomenon of Indonesia, such as underwater volcanoes, hydrothermal vents and other natural activities, contributes to greater deep-sea biodiversity," Indonesian Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries Fadel Muhammad told America.gov July 14.

"This scientific knowledge provides extensive understanding of climate crisis and its related challenges," he added. "As we still know very little about our ocean, it is important to continue scientific exploration in order to discover nature's benefits for our communities."

The information gathered and products developed, like digital maps and high-definition video, will help experts better understand, use and protect ocean resources. Coral ecosystems, sponges and other marine organisms offer promise for treating diseases. Some deep-sea ecosystems include organisms that can be used as food. And information from deep-sea exploration can add to knowledge about earthquakes and tsunamis.

Only about 5 percent of the world's oceans has been explored.

EXPLORING THE UNKNOWN

For the expedition, each nation is contributing a ship with special capabilities. INDEX 2010 is the maiden voyage of NOAA ship Okeanos Explorer, the only U.S. government ship dedicated to ocean exploration. Okeanos is from the Greek word for ocean exploration, and the ship was named in a contest for schoolchildren.

Among the ship's many systems is a hull-mounted multibeam sonar, which uses sound pulses to detect shapes on the seafloor and produce high-resolution maps of the seafloor as deep as 7,000 meters. It also has a two-piece ROV, attached to the ship by a tether, that is able to operate to depths of 4,000 meters. One vehicle is suspended above the other to light up and record the surroundings.

"We're putting the ship in a position where it's going out to largely unknown areas of the ocean — areas where, if there were a map, there would be a big question mark," scientist John McDonough, deputy director of the NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration and Research, told America.gov.

"The mapping system will allow us to bring back good maps of an area," he added, "creating a foundation of information that others can use to make determinations about going back and doing follow-up work."

The Okeanos Explorer will map the deep ocean floor and water column, collecting oceanographic data and obtaining high-definition video through the ROV's cameras. The Indonesian ship Baruna Jaya IV will map the seafloor in different locations and collect biological and other samples from the sea.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The expedition's work has already begun. Between June 24-July 14 for Okeanos Explorer and July 14-19 for Baruna Jaya IV, Okeanos conducted multibeam mapping and ROV operations and Baruna Jaya conducted mapping operations and more traditional sampling.

The final leg takes place July 21-August 7 for Okeanos and July 20-August 7 for Baruna Jaya IV.

McDonough said the Okeanos Explorer plans to return to Indonesia in the summer of 2011 for a second year of operations. He said the results of exploration and discussions with the project's science team and partners will determine activities for the rest of the three-year project.

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